DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 236 CE 078 148

TITLE	How Adult Education Program Improvement Is Working in Pennsylvania. An Introduction to Pennsylvania's Adult Basic and Literacy Education Program Improvement Initiative.
INSTITUTION	Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13, Lancaster, PA.
SPONS AGENCY	Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, Harrisburg. Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	13p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Educational Quality; Literacy Education; Outcomes of Education; Pilot Projects; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; *Program Improvement; Staff Development; State Programs; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	Pennsylvania; 353 Project

ABSTRACT

EQUAL (Educational Quality or Adult Literacy) is Pennsylvania's program improvement initiative that measures performance by the quality of education learners receive. For 3 years, Project EQUAL was piloted in adult education agencies throughout the state. Beginning in 1997, the pilot projects helped to develop a process for continuous program improvement for 22 adult basic and literacy education programs. During the first 2 years, the pilot programs systematically collected learner assessment data on a sample of learners. In the third year, the pilot projects reviewed the results of their learner assessment data and began to analyze their own assessment practices and results. Data were used to view program performance against indicators of program quality, especially in the areas of assessment, curriculum, and instruction. At the state level, assessment data submitted on 1,800 adult learners were analyzed. After 3 years of EQUAL, many changes are evident, including the following: (1) programs are standardizing their intake, assessment, and close-out procedures; (2) new monitoring practices are in place to document the progress of students who leave before completing a program; (3) multi-service agencies are working as a team, using common intake and data collection procedures; (4) staff are using data collection and analysis as tools for program improvement, not just program requirements; and (5) program improvement activities are becoming part of ongoing staff development. (KC)

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ED 427 236

An Introduction to Pennsylvania's Adult Basic and Literacy Education Program Improvement Initiative

Educational Quality for Adult Literacy

EQUAL

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How Adult Education Program Improvement Is Working in Pennsylvania

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Every adult who wishes to improve his or her basic educational foundation shall have access to quality adult education that will enable the individual to articulate educational goals, persist in learning, demonstrate achievement, and become a lifelong learner.

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Produced by Project AXIS (Adult education eXpress Intercommunication Support)
P.O. Box 182, Lancaster, PA 17608-0182
under Adult Education Act, Section 353, 1997-98
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Working for quality.

EQUAL—Educational Quality for Adult Literacy—is Pennsylvania's program improvement initiative. It is transforming Pennsylvania's adult basic and literacy education system from one that has judged performance by counting the number of people it serves to one that measures performance by the quality of education its learners receive. It is changing adult education with the help of teachers, volunteers, learners, and program administrators who are identifying what they need to improve teaching and learning.

For three years Project EQUAL was piloted in adult education agencies throughout Pennsylvania. The pilots helped to develop a process for continuous program improvement that worked for all types of agencies, regardless of size or geographic location.

EQUAL agencies are working in effective staff teams. They are conducting reliable and valid learner assessment. They are using data to understand their agencies' problems and identify steps to improve them. And they have the ability to report reliable, valid data to the state as well as use it to manage their local programs.

What does it take to be an EQUAL agency?

It takes a commitment by administrators and everyone who participates ... and the flexibility to do things differently. For EQUAL agencies, operations are no longer "business as usual" but a way of working that continuously improves the effectiveness of services to adult learners.

We are proud in Pennsylvania to be effecting real change in our adult education system.

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How EQUAL unfolded over the pilot phase ...

Twenty-two adult basic and literacy education programs across Pennsylvania served as EQUAL pilot sites, beginning in 1994. They represented the range of providers: volunteer-based literacy councils, school districts, Intermediate Units, community-based organizations, community colleges, and correctional institutions. They were big, small, and medium-sized, located in rural, urban, and suburban settings. Each pilot site designated a Coordinator and an Instructor to participate in EQUAL training activities. The EQUAL Advisory Board offered their expertise to the process.

During Years One and Two, the pilots systematically collected learner assessment data on a sample of learners. All forms of assessment practices were accommodated—a variety of standardized tests, along with qualitative assessments. Coordinators documented and submitted sample data to the EQUAL Project Director. The pilots began using their data to understand self-selected problems in areas of concern to their local programs.

In Year Three, the pilots reviewed the results of their learner assessment data and began to analyze their own assessment practices and results. They began more directed use of data to view program performance against the Indicators of Program Quality, especially in the areas of assessment, curriculum, and instruction. They used the new Program Self-Assessment Guide to identify areas of concern and write program improvement plans.

At the state level, assessment data submitted on 1,800 adult learners was analyzed. Information submitted on standardized assessments was used to set draft Program Performance Standards—in other words, to help set expectations of how much learning can realistically be expected in a given amount of time based on specific measurements. The state's data reporting system was revised accordingly.

Indicators of Program Quality

1. Learners demonstrate progress toward attainment of basic skills and competencies that support their educational goals.
2. Learners advance in the instructional program or complete program educational requirements that allow them to continue their education or training into other skills levels.
3. The program has a planning process that is ongoing and participatory, guided by evaluation, and based on a written plan that considers community demographics, needs, resources, and economic and technological trends, and is implemented to its fullest extent.

3a. Annual and fiscal reports are submitted on time and reflect progress.

4. Program hours, curriculum and instruction geared to student learning styles and levels of student needs.

4a. Adequate instructional materials are provided to enable students to become functionally literate.

5. Program identifies students' needs for support services and makes services available to students whether directly or through referral to other educational and service agencies with which the program coordinates.
6. Program successfully recruits the population in the community identified in the Adult Education Act as needing literacy services.
7. Students remain in the program long enough to meet educational goals.
8. Staff development is operational and ongoing.
9. Program has an ongoing relationship with volunteers or tutors.
10. Adult educators have the ability to relate to educationally disadvantaged learners.

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As the time to "take EQUAL to scale" approached, Pennsylvania's six regional Professional Development Centers began participating in EQUAL meetings. The purpose: to identify key training and technical-assistance activities needed to engage all state-funded programs in EQUAL. Training modules were developed to help the PDCs deliver consistent, quality professional development opportunities throughout the state.

After three years of EQUAL, many changes are evident. Among them:

- Programs are standardizing their intake, assessment, and close-out procedures.
- New monitoring practices are in place to document the progress of students who leave before completing a program.
- Multi-service agencies are working as a team, using common intake and data-collection procedures.
- Staff are using data collection and analysis as tools for program improvement, not just program requirements.
- Data is being made more accessible to instructors, not stuffed away in a file drawer.
- Instructors—paid and volunteer—are expanding their roles as teachers to program planners.
- Staff in all phases of a program are working as a team with the common goal of program improvement.
- Program improvement activities are becoming a part of ongoing staff development.

EQUAL's conscientiously developed program improvement model is now being applied in an ever larger number of programs. The ultimate goal: a quality basic education for all adults.

At the core: viewing the program as a system.

For many programs, the first step in EQUAL— that is, the first step toward program improvement—is to begin viewing the entire adult education program as an integrated system. That system is woven of many key elements, from how staff are hired to the agency's public image. At the core of the system is the connection between what the adult learners who walk in the door *need to learn* and how services are delivered to *meet that need*.

EQUAL provides a structure for viewing any adult education program as an integrated system ....

- It lays a framework for determining individuals' needs through reliable, valid assessment.
- It applies what the assessment reveals directly to instructional practice.
- It ties curriculum and instruction to learner outcomes.
- It produces data upon which administrative and educational decisions can be based.
- It builds a team of involved staff members who work together toward specific ways to improve the program.
- It provides a tested way for a program to evaluate its own performance.

Student recruitment, retention, assessment, instruction, professional development .... these are not isolated elements but facets of a program that work in concert to make it what it is. The more effectively all the elements work together, the more effective the improvement process will be.

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The Role of Data in Program Management

by Judith A. Alamprese
Abt Associates

As adult education programs serve increased numbers of learners with fewer resources, administrators are recognizing the need for better methods for managing and improving the services they offer. While the quality of programs has always been a concern of adult education administrators, the recent emphasis on program standards and the call for evidence of program impact have prompted administrators to reconsider the use of data in their programs.

Through EQUAL, administrators and teachers are working together to identify problems that affect program quality and productivity, the types of information that are needed to develop solutions to these problems, and the steps that can be taken to improve programs based on this information.

The experience of Project EQUAL provides a foundation for understanding the benefits of having staff collaborate in using information as the basis for making programmatic decisions. While staff may be able to identify activities that are not working in a program, they often do not have a way of determining the most effective solutions to problems. By having a systematic process for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, administrators and staff are better able to make informed decisions about a program's operations.

As the demand for quality programs increases, administrators should consider the critical role of data in their programs, both in understanding the areas of their program that are effective and in identifying changes that might be made to improve services.

Excerpted from *The Pennsylvania ABLE Administrators Handbook, 1996 Edition*

Programs are using data to make better decisions.

A growing number of adult basic and literacy education programs in Pennsylvania are becoming involved in program improvement activities. They are making decisions and plans based on data, not just "gut feelings," as one EQUAL pilot site coordinator put it.

The process starts with a close look at each area of the program. Using the Agency Self-Assessment Guide, programs ask themselves questions related to Pennsylvania's Indicators of Program Quality. For example, Indicator #1 addresses learners' educational gains. The corresponding section of the Agency Self-Assessment asks about the agency's intake and assessment process—how learner goals are determined, how entering students' basic skills are assessed (and reassessed), how information is communicated to students, how student progress is tracked, and how the process could be improved.

Data for Decision Making: The Process

Identify a question or area of concern

▼

Collect data

▼

Analyze data

▼

Develop a program improvement plan

The Data for Decision Making Log guides the program through a process for addressing the area of concern identified during the Agency Self-Assessment. What data is currently available to shed light on that area? What other data is needed? What would be the best way to collect it? What does the collected data show? Based on the data, the program then draws up an action plan to address the stated question or concern.

For example, one adult educator reported concerns about the number of adult students dropping out of classes before they

accomplished their goals. As a Project EQUAL exercise, the staff decided to investigate why. They discovered the program was not providing the kind of consistent feedback students need to persist at their education. They discovered some individuals quit the program because they believed they were not making sufficient progress. When the program improved the way it gave learners feedback, it dramatically reduced the number of drop-outs and increased the number who completed successfully.

Some agencies work on the entire data for decision making process as a team. In other agencies, an administrator identifies the area of concern and a team completes the Data for Decision Making Log together. Some teachers function as leaders, completing logs and picking areas of concern, getting input from each other along the way in a very workable collaborative approach.

The Staff Team: Something's Different

Participants in the EQUAL pilot noted a significant improvement in staff interaction. At the beginning, some sites carried out specific team-building activities, which paid off. At the end of the three years, site coordinators remarked at how EQUAL provides a structured way for information to spread among staff members. They also noted that staff discuss issues more frequently and openly, are more responsible for accountability, and that a "more professional atmosphere" permeates the program.

Quality data use is connecting program improvement to performance standards.

As the framework of a new statewide evaluation system, EQUAL has enabled the Pennsylvania Department of Education to set Program Performance Standards that focus on the effectiveness of program operations and adult learner progress. Assessment data are being used to align statewide policy with program improvement needs.

Refining learner assessment practices is essential to the process. After all, solid decisions need to be based on solid information. EQUAL agencies are trained in proper assessment procedures to promote uniformity and consistency for all students, thus improving the quality of data collected.

One program reported that they continued to use the same standardized assessment instrument as always but changed the timing of test administration. Before, they tested everyone on certain dates. Now they individually schedule testing so that enough time has passed between pre- and post-testing. Learning gains have become more apparent as a result.

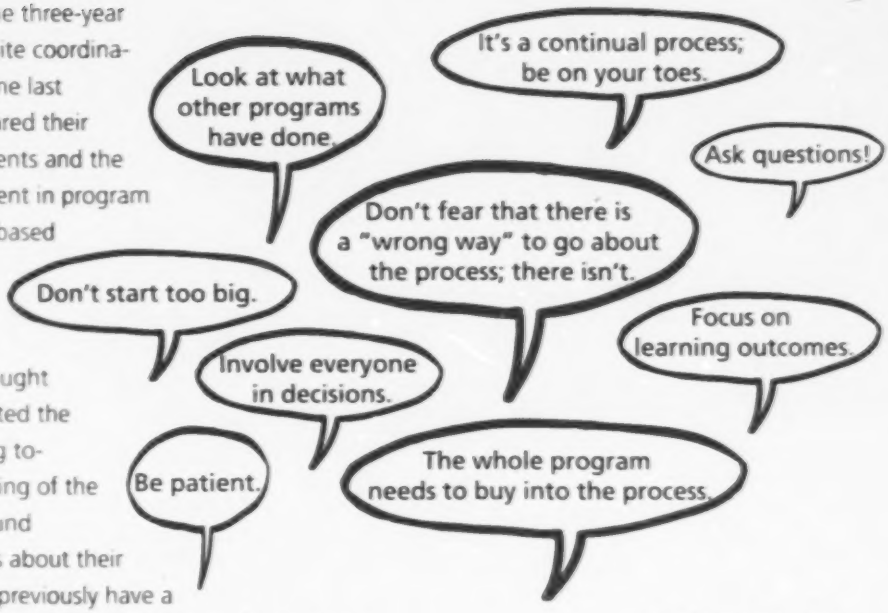
Another EQUAL pilot site analyzed its learner assessment data against the draft Program Performance Standards. Sure enough, they verified that their learners were demonstrating expected gains in all programs—even exceeding in some programs!

In 1997-98 the Pennsylvania Department of Education is making a significant investment by providing federal funds to a number of agencies which have indicated a willingness to expand their services to new learners while participating in EQUAL training. They will be the first cohort of adult education agencies to analyze program and learner assessment data against statewide Program Performance Standards for submission to the state.

EQUAL pilots share their experiences ...

At the end of the three-year EQUAL pilot, site coordinators met for one last time. They shared their experiences—the best moments and the challenges of their involvement in program improvement through data-based decision making.

They talked about the positive changes EQUAL brought to their programs. They related the "sense of everything coming together" as their understanding of the process developed. They found themselves asking questions about their programs that they did not previously have a structure for identifying. They pointed to the Data for Decision Making Logs as giving their programs direction for the future.


Look at what other programs have done.
It's a continual process; be on your toes.
Ask questions!
Don't fear that there is a "wrong way" to go about the process; there isn't.
Don't start too big.
Focus on learning outcomes.
Involve everyone in decisions.
Be patient.
The whole program needs to buy into the process.

Participants in the three-year pilot offer some tips and advice for getting started. The above statements were actual comments of EQUAL pilot site coordinators.

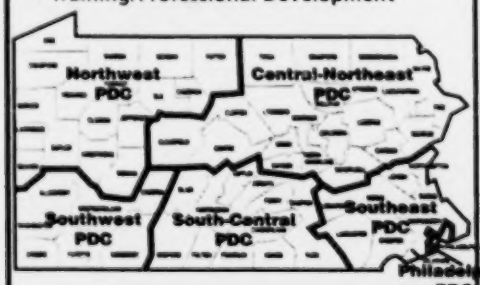
In addition, pilot site coordinators were interviewed by staff of Abt Associates, who directed the three-year initiative. They recognized the importance of accurate data collection. They reported many new ways their programs are addressing areas of concern that were identified through the EQUAL process. They noted how such curricular, instructional, and organizational changes are affecting the entire program. Said one administrator, "EQUAL made us think about what our goals are and ask if they're being met."

As EQUAL expands to more programs, the Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education is providing training in learner assessment and the EQUAL program improvement process through the six regional Professional Development Centers. Many experienced EQUAL participants are serving as trainers.

For more information...

Quality improvement for Pennsylvania's local Adult Basic and Literacy Education programs is supported by a collaborative team of professionals. Check the chart at right for information on who is handling each aspect of the EQUAL initiative.

What?	Who?	Where?
• Program Performance Standards • Names of EQUAL Pilot Sites • Names of EQUAL Advisory Board	Pa. Dept. of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic & Literacy Education	(717) 787-5532 Fax (717) 783-0583
• Technical Assistance	Abt Associates	(301) 718-3168 Fax (301) 652-3618
• Agency Self-Assessment • Training Coordination	Southeastern PDC	(717) 270-2935
• Assessment Training	South-Central PDC	(717) 248-4942
• Training/Professional Development	Northwest PDC	(814) 866-3105, x223
	Central-Northeast PDC	(814) 359-3069
	Southwest PDC	(412) 661-READ
	South-Central PDC	(717) 248-4942
	Southeastern PDC	(717) 270-2935
	Philadelphia PDC	(215) 685-6602



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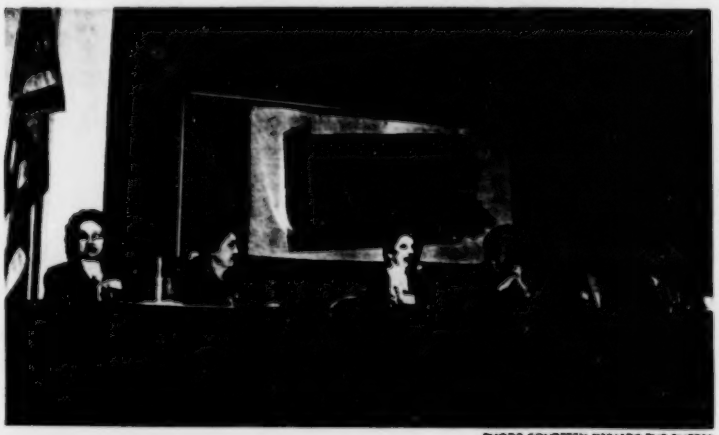

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Discussing EQUAL at the 1997 Midwinter Conference on Adult Education, left to right: Sandy Strunk, SEPDC; Judith Alamprese, Abt Associates; Cheryl Keenan, Bureau of ABLE Director; Judy Koloski, National Consortium; Ella Morin and Sonny Sloan, Bureau of ABLE Division Chiefs.

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